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Why I Hate Hearing Someone Say “Thank You For Your Service”!

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By Larry Nader, US Navy Veteran 1976-1982

When I enlisted in the United States Navy, I was barely 17 and still in high school. The Vietnam War had just officially ended a month earlier.

Joining on the delayed entry program, I finished high school in June 1976 and within three weeks was on a plane to Orlando for boot camp.

For those of you who were not born yet, this was a very tough time in US history. The civil rights fight was still happening but not as active as it was in the 1960s, the free love era was officially over and the media brought the Vietnam war directly into our homes for the first time in history, via television. We were a divided country, not totally unlike we are today. This was the first time that Americans not in the military could see and witness near first-hand accounts of the fighting and tragedy of war and it was not handled well.

Soldiers like Lt. William Calley were thrown under the bus by their leaders when the media reported incidents where the casualties of war included innocents such as women and children. What the media did not tell us then was that these women and children many times were implements of the Vietcong carrying explosives to kill our troops. While what Calley did was a punishable act, but he did not act alone without orders from above. Orders from people that never had to answer the public or a war tribunal. All wars prior had innocent casualties as well but the Vietnam War was the war that changed the methods of fighting.

Nam was really the first true guerrilla warfare that we faced as a nation. One with no rules to follow except on the part of American troops as your government tied our military's hands in many situations. Units that were under fire by the Vietcong were not allowed to receive air support, especially if they were in the area of rubber plantations (the rubber manufacturers relied heavily on these sources).

Our political leaders constantly abandoned our military personnel under the bus time and time again by refusing to provide the proper support when it was needed. I am not a proponent of war but if you are going to fight a war you fight to win, not to be politically correct. If you were attacked on the street would you defend yourself and family, or would you worry about if you were acting politically correct or not at the risk of you and your family's lives?

Additionally, our leaders poisoned our own troops with the extreme overuse of Agent Orange and other rainbow herbicides along with pesticides. This was not limited to Vietnam, even though to this day our leaders refuse to admit the use of these chemicals anywhere other than Vietnam and the DMZ area.

Our military were put into a situation of survival and while some may have gone overboard at times, in most cases the casualties were part of what had to be done to survive and to try to make it back

home to their loved ones, something that many from that era never did. When you visit the Vietnam Memorial in DC be sure to read the names and realize these were men and women with families that died for our country.

Based on the sentiment and reaction of the American public to what they were witnessing daily on the nightly news and in newspapers, many of those serving opted to re-enlist when their initial term was up instead of coming home to face the protests and the American public spitting on them and calling them baby killers. These were actions of people that did not serve and never had to fight for their own survival. Instead, many of them, they stayed home on college deferments and spewed venom at those who were fighting in their place. Vietnam was a case of kill or be killed and it was a hard pill to swallow back home to those who only saw what the talking head media showed them on their nightly news broadcasts.

Those that did make it home were rarely in one piece, physically and mentally. PTSD was not a diagnosis back then. Our Vietnam era veterans were treated as pariahs in public and found the country they left to defend was not the country they returned home to. With no support from the government or the American public, many turned to other avenues – biker gangs, soldiers of fortune and more. They used the skills they had to acquire to survive in Vietnam anyway they could to survive in the face of the unjust hatred that was thrown at them back in their home country.

As I stated in the beginning of this article, I served post-Vietnam, so everything must have been rosy for me as it was peace time, right? Not even close.

After boot camp, I was sent to Groton, Connecticut for submarine service training, and while the people of Groton were relatively friendly to the military we were still treated differently in the public. It was hard to go out in public without someone trying to pick a fight with you. We stood out like sore thumbs in an era where most everyone under 35 had long hair, as many of us did before we joined. But overall Groton was a nice place to be for a few months.

The real eye opener was after Groton when I was sent to Virginia Beach, VA for Electronics school at the Dam Neck Naval Station. The attitude in Virginia Beach by the public was basically the same as in Groton but it was in Norfolk, VA that I first saw signs in front of businesses and homes that said, "Dogs, Sailors and Cats, keep off the grass." What a welcome to our community and dose of good old fashion southern hospitality that was for us.

Following my training at Dam Neck in Virginia Beach, I was stationed aboard the USS Proteus (AS-19) in Guam arriving aboard in March 1978. This was the first duty station where I truly felt at home. The Proteus was a submarine tender and we were stationed in port mostly with anywhere from two to six submarines moored alongside us to receive service, upgrades, weapons, and supplies before changing crews and deploying on their six-month missions.

The people of Guam, called Chamorro, were fantastic to us overall. There were a few exceptions but the island really opened their arms and welcomed the US military. A different community on the island hosted a fiesta very weekend and the whole island was invited. It didn't matter who you were the food and drinks flowed freely to all. It was in the mid- to high-80s year-round. The air was clean and the waters clear. The snorkeling was fantastic. I could never have asked for a better duty station.

Then we found that in November of that year we were going to the shipyards in Long Beach, CA for a retrofit. We were relieved by the USS Hunley (AS-31) until we returned to Guam in 1980. Later in 1980, I was transferred to the USS Turner Joy (DD-951) a destroyer stationed in San Diego. San Diego was a great duty station as well. I had family in the area so I spent very little time around other military. This was my second favorite place to be stationed behind Guam and overall, we were treated well by the public but, by the early 1980s, we were five years post-Nam and the wounds were starting to heal.

While I never served in Vietnam, the Turner Joy was the ship that fired the first shot in Tonkin Bay to start the United States action in Vietnam. So, I guess it was only fitting that while I was on board for her final mission in the Western Pacific (WestPac) before being decommissioned, that we were fired on by three Vietnamese fishing boats the night of June 23, 1982, a night I will never forget. Read the article on this event [here](#).

We were part of four ships traveling in formation on our way back to the Philippines from Thailand when we were fired on. Then President Regan ordered the ships to surround the boats and hold them until morning. Once we could verify they were Vietnamese boats, we broke formation and continued our mission without involvement as directed by the President. A second Vietnam War was diverted that night.

That morning, a few hours after breaking formation, the command ship spotted something on the horizon in the open ocean. As this appeared to be debris adrift in open shipping lanes, the Turner Joy was ordered to investigate this and destroy the debris so other ships would not be potentially damaged by it.

As we approached the object we noticed it was a raft with approximately 20 Vietnamese refugees that sailed into the open ocean in hopes of being rescued so they could flee their government persecutors in their home country. These refugees had been adrift for over ten days and had been out of food for several days and out of water for more than a day before we found them.

We were able to rescue all of these refugees, quarantine them with makeshift shelter on our ships' fantail and steamed quickly to the Philippines to get them medical assistance. I am proud to say that all survived and were sent to various parts of the world to be with family. This was what my six years of service was all about; my purpose for serving if you will. Those of us serving aboard the Turner Joy were awarded the Humanitarian Ribbon for our efforts. This was without a doubt, the proudest day of my life.

Following that day, I was honorably discharged in July 1982 and returned home to start my post-military life.

So, imagine my surprise in December 2016 when I found out that there were numerous first-hand reports from former military that herbicides such as agent orange were used on Guam through the 1980s. These herbicides were great for quickly clearing the foliage of a jungle and helping the military maintain a clear and open perimeter around the base for safety purposes, but were extremely toxic, especially when as heavily used as it was. In addition to the herbicides reports also indicated that pesticides such as DDT and others were also used.

These herbicides and pesticides, as well as chemicals such as degreasers containing PCE and TCE were also used on the bases on Guam. The herbicides and pesticides were sprayed around water sources that provided drinking water to the military bases. Nearly 39 years after I first arrived on Guam, I found out about this contamination and to this day the Department of Defense continues to deny that any rainbow chemicals were ever on the island or transported through let alone used. These toxins were in the water we drank and showered with.

Finally, in January 2017, due to the relentless work of Air Force Master Sargent Leroy Foster and Florida Rep. Dennis Ross, the [Foster Act](#) was introduced into the US House of Representatives. This bill is designed to extend presumptive status for agent orange exposure to those who served on Guam during the Vietnam era. MSGT Foster has provided first-hand testimony, a signed affidavit, and photos stating that agent orange was not only used on the island but he was one of the people who were assigned to spray it on and around Anderson Air Force base.

There are tens of thousands of veterans who were on Guam during and after Vietnam who have deteriorating health including diminished mental capacity, spinal deterioration, cancer and more. Many have already died while the VA continues to deny them and their families their much-needed benefits. The Department of Defense (DOD) continues to deny the use of agent orange despite many first-hand reports and sworn affidavits such as Foster's.

Those of us involved in this fight have been pushing hard to gain media attention and the support of our government leaders such as our US Representatives and Senators to support and pass this bill. Additionally, the bill needs to be amended to provide support to all who served post-Vietnam as well as the exposure and contamination did not just evaporate when we officially ended Vietnam in late 1975.

In most all cases our pleas have fallen on deaf ears with a few exceptions. In my personal case, calls and emails to Rep Trent Franks' (AZ) and Senator John McCain's offices gone completely unanswered as have support requests to the local television media.

In late 2016 and early 2017, NBC8 and ABC9 out of Tampa ran stories on MSGT Foster, a man who has deteriorated so badly that he has told me and many others that death cannot come quickly enough. He, like many others who were exposed, has had children and/or grandchildren born with birth defects that are directly related to exposure to chemicals such as agent orange. Had he had boots on the ground in Vietnam he and his family would be covered. Since he was never physically in Vietnam, he has been denied repeatedly by the VA.

Additionally, Kyla Perry, a writer with the Pacific Daily News in Guam, has been reporting on this since late 2016 as well. With several articles showing first-hand reports of the use of these chemicals. This lack of care from the Department of Defense has had terminal effects on not only those who served our country on Guam but their families (multiple generations) as well as the residents of Guam where infant mortality and cancer rates have been very high.

You can see a full list of news articles and links regarding the coverage of the use of these herbicides on Guam at the end of this article.

These chemicals do not leave your system, instead they work their way through our bodies and make their home in our organs and tissues, causing long-term health issues and eventually death. The effect of this exposure is handed down through the generations.

The Foster Act, [US House Bill HR-809](#), needs to be passed and we need Americans to make this a priority with their elected officials. This has nothing to do with leaning left or leaning right. It has everything to do with being on the right side of history and finally stepping up and providing those who served us the proper benefits needed.

So, why do I hate hearing the words, "Thank You For Your Service"? It's very simple. While I believe most people today realize our military personnel (excluding our military leaders) are not the people that create wars, but they are the ones who must deal with the mess created by our politicians and leaders, I also feel the words have become very insincere. These words roll off everyone's lips as simply as saying "Good Morning" to a casual stranger. It is a very nice greeting but carries very little true empathy.

If you truly want to thank me and the others who have served in the past and today, you will not turn a blind eye to the treatment of our military personnel and veterans and demand accountability from Washington and the DOD, for their actions and proper care needed for those returning home from duty.

As a country, we are only as strong as our weakest link and in today's America, I am seeing a lot of weak links, on all sides. It is not the blame of Democrats, Republicans or Independents, it is the blame of our system. A broken and corrupt system that only cares about advancing their own agenda and power. They have no concern for those being discharged, whether healthy or injured, as those people are no longer of any use to them politically. Our veterans are forgotten and disposed of like yesterday's left over fish.

Without proper support and care, these veterans continue to fall through the cracks of society, becoming homeless or taking their own lives as they cannot find a way to assimilate back into our society. We ignore them and leave them to fend for themselves. This has resulted in a veteran suicide rate of nearly 22 veterans each day in this country, more than 8,000 veterans committing suicide each year. Here in Arizona, we are seeing a rate of 7 suicides every ten days or roughly 255 veteran suicides every year.

I ask you this, if there were 8,000 children dying every year, what would be your response? What about 8,000 women committing suicide each year? Or for you sports fans, 8,000 NFL players or NBA players dying annually. What does it take for you as an American to no longer turn a blind eye to this catastrophe and demand Washington to step up and provide the proper support needed?

You will not see these veterans marching down main street demanding support and treatment. You will not see them rioting and burning cars, or breaking store windows and looting. Instead, they quietly suffer and try to navigate a VA system that is so broken it can barely provide basic support and health care to the veterans it is designed to serve.

Maybe we veterans should bond together and start marching, looting and burning. Maybe that will finally get some attention by the media and the American public who put more focus on reality television and celebrities than they put on those who serve our country locally and abroad.

So, please do not thank me for my service. Those words mean nothing to me. If you really care and appreciate what our military does for us, then please act by supporting veteran organizations in your community, volunteering your time to help a veteran in need (of any age group), and by demanding that your federal leaders take proper action and hold our military leaders accountable.

Our country is only as strong as you help make it. You are either part of the problem or part of the solution. What side do you choose to stand on?

NBC8 WFLA Video Links

02/03/2017 - <http://wfla.com/2017/02/03/lakeland-veteran-fights-to-get-out-the-truth-honored-by-congressman/>

02/02/2017 - <http://wfla.com/2017/02/02/target-8-reports-prompt-legislation-that-could-benefit-thousands-of-veterans/>

01/25/2017 - <http://wfla.com/2017/01/25/veteran-captain-wont-request-agent-orange-benefits-until-his-crew-gets-help/>

01/18/2017 - <http://wfla.com/2017/01/18/target-8-tampa-woman-traces-family-tragedies-to-agent-orange-camp-lejeune/>

01/10/2017 - <http://wfla.com/2017/01/10/target-8-congressmans-call-for-expanded-agent-orange-benefits-follows-target-8-investigation/>

01/04/2017 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OO6FJ1vZIXg>

12/21/2016 – <http://wfla.com/2016/12/21/pinellas-veteran-claims-40-year-cover-up-by-u-s-a-f/>

ABC9 WFTV Video Links

01/26/2017 - <http://www.wftv.com/news/local/9-investigates-care-for-veterans-exposed-to-agent-orange/488219455>

Facebook pages

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/agentorangeguam/>

https://www.facebook.com/Agent-Orange-Okinawa-205895316098692/?hc_location=ufi

<https://www.facebook.com/Miltoxchemicals/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Miltoxchemicals/>

News Articles

https://www.postguam.com/news/local/veterans-assist-with-agent-orange-investigation/article_3f75df22-f421-11e6-9e25-2be60dc4c838.html

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/02/08/two-more-veterans-allege-personally-spraying-agent-orange-both-air-force-and-navy-bases/97619046/>

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/01/07/air-force-veteran-72-alleges-agent-orange-use-guam/96274458/>

<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/2017/01/05/68-year-old-air-force-veteran-said-he-sprayed-agent-orange-guam-60s-70s/96187572/>

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/01/14/more-veterans-allege-agent-orange-use-military-bases/96568368/>

<https://www.facebook.com/36WGPA/posts/124112400972720>

<http://www.veteranstoday.com/2013/09/26/were-vets-who-served-in-guam-exposed-to-agent-orange-and-denied-benefits/>

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/02/02/congressman-introduces-guam-inspired-agent-orange-bill/97419880/>

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/01/23/calvo-orders-agent-orange-testing/96937432/>

HR 809 – The Foster Act

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/809/committees>

<http://dennisross.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398557>